MARIO TESTINO
PORTRAITS

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MARIO TESTINO
PORTRAITS

Edited and written by Patrick Kinmonth

with contributions from Charles Saumarez Smith and Alexandra Shulman

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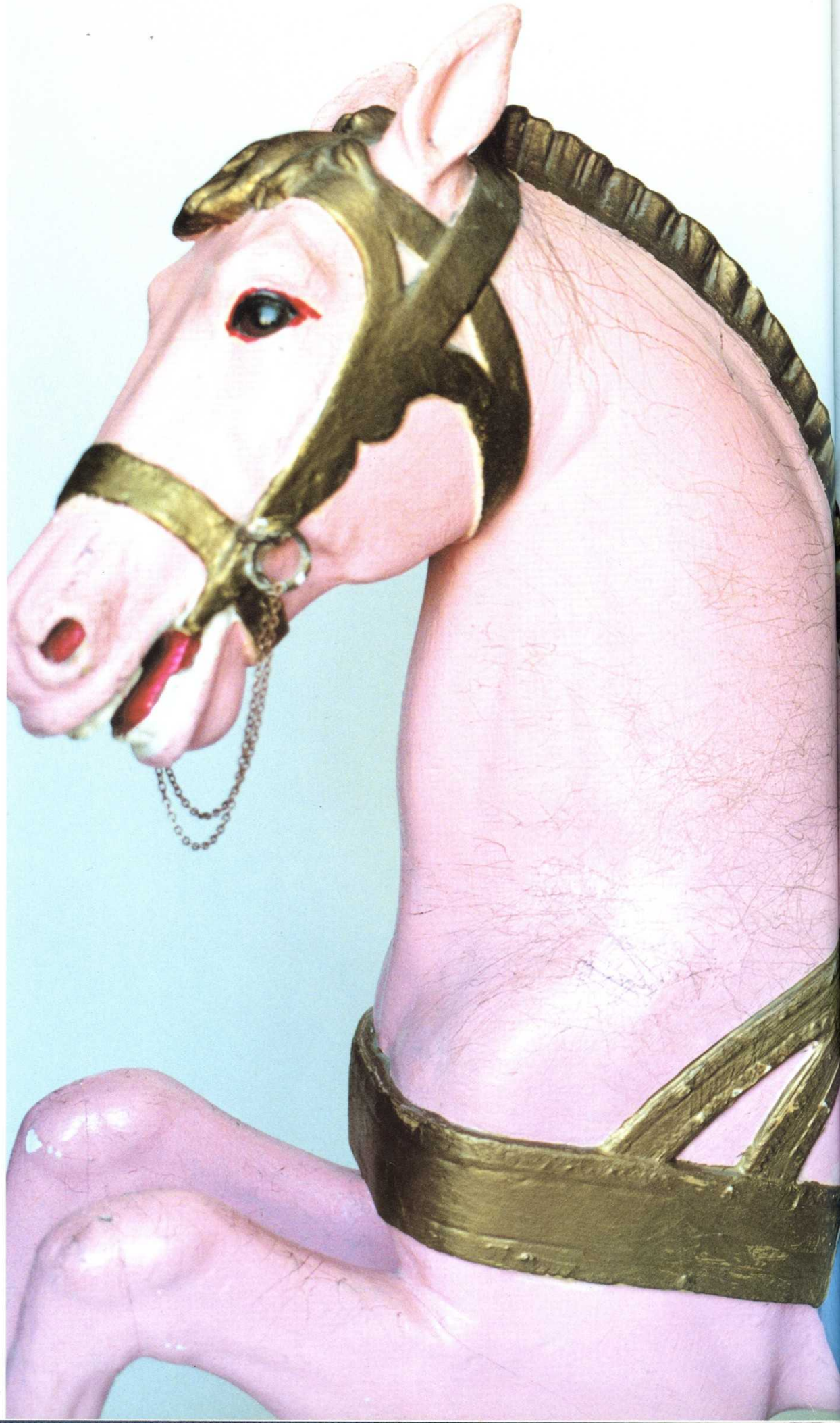

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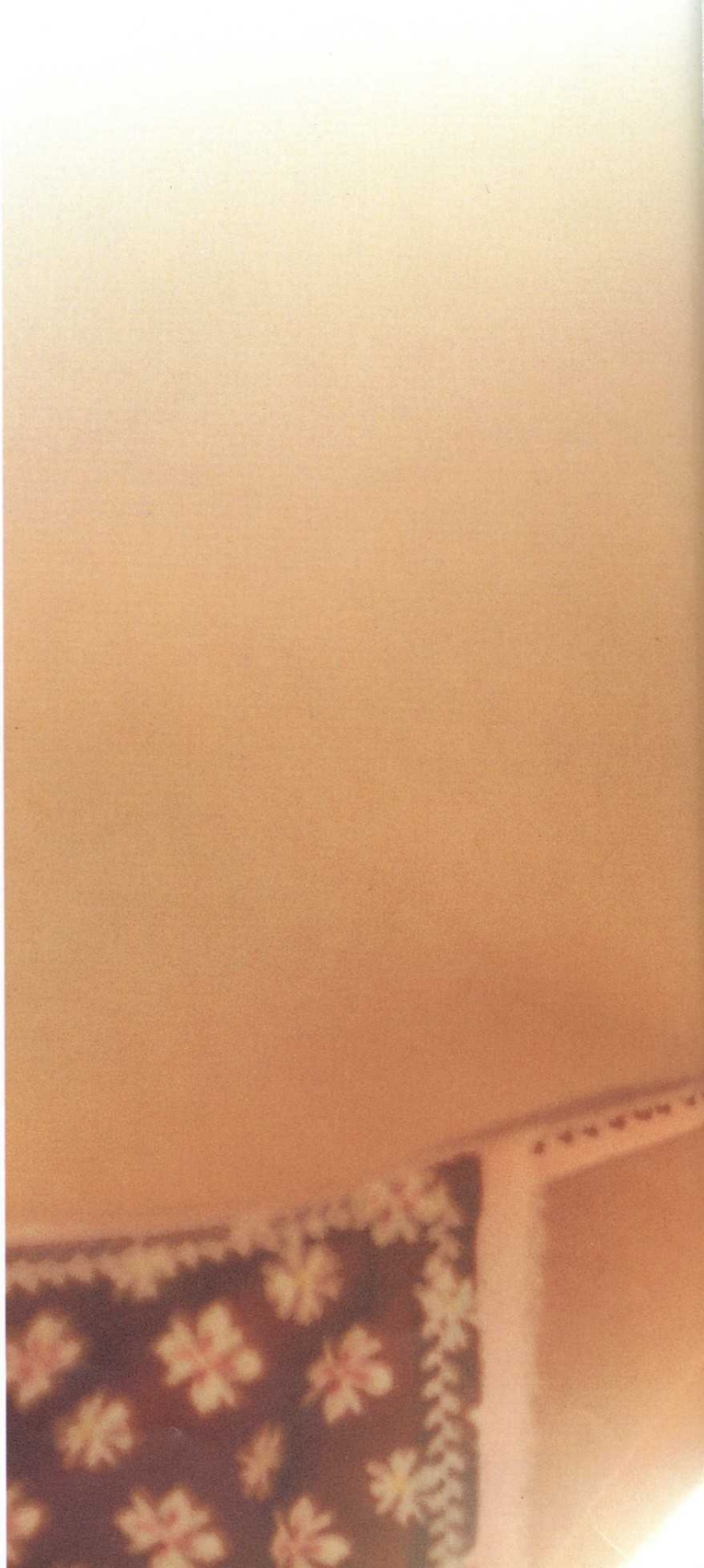

PROLOGUE

When I first arrived as editor of British *Vogue* in 1992, the fashion world was in metamorphosis. Although change is a defining feature of fashion, it is relatively rare for the fashion zeitgeist to alter radically and throw a new cast of characters onto centre stage. But that is exactly what was happening as the Thatcher years ended and a new era began.

I don't remember when I first met Mario but it was many years before this. Although a Peruvian, and very much a South American in his attitude, stance and manner, it seems that he has always been a part of London – a laughing, compelling, figure, generating fun and fanfare, surrounded by a coterie of comrades and harnessing creative talent to his coat tails. But it was not until these years of the early nineties that he emerged as one of our leading fashion and portrait photographers.

The style of the previous decade had been characterised by a brash glitz. Amazonian supermodels strode in shoulder pads and high heels through the richly coloured fashion pages. Their majestic beauty seemed unnatural and invincible – the Western economic boom made flesh. But as the decade drew to an end, and the boom turned to bust, the fashion world responded, and this world of pneumatic perfection just disappeared, to be replaced by a new anti-glamour look.

Power suits gave way to a simpler more monochrome aesthetic. In advertising campaigns waif-like girls curled upon dusty floorboards with only a chipped polystyrene coffee cup as accessory. The stiletto made way for the trainer. And the high voltage photography of the past decade was replaced by the downbeat, faux reportage of grunge. None of this though, was ideal for the style, aspiration and escapism that people desire and expect from *Vogue*. Enter Mario.

Although he had been working as a photographer for a number of years it was only around this time that the signature Testino style gelled. All photographers

need to establish in the viewer's mind what it is that they bring to the subject, to transform it from a simple depiction to something they have uniquely seen. What Mario offered straddled the old and new. The aura was glamorous but had a footing in reality. Both his male and female subjects looked the way that you might look, not in your wildest dreams, but at the remotest end of possibility. As fashion shuffled through this transitional 'heroin chic' phase, Mario pushed onwards with a light, confident, smart optimism, that shone through and looked fresh. It was exactly what *Vogue* needed.

There is something intrinsically Latin about what Mario brings to his photography. His subjects, for instance, often display acres of flesh, but in an exuberant and cheerful way. The camp of carnival can sneak into one image, a cool androgyny the next. In Mario's world people enjoy themselves whether they be partying wildly at a minutely orchestrated shoot for *Vogue* or carefully posed alone, like his last iconic images of the late Princess of Wales for *Vanity Fair*.

The pleasure of being in his company gains him access where many others fail. As a portrait photographer Mario ensures that his subjects first relax, drawing away their anxieties as he distracts them with jokes and anecdotes, mimicry and admiration. His images are characterised by the ease that this engenders but it would be wrong to think that there is anything casual about them. He is rigorous in his vision. His work does not expose vulnerability, worry, neuroses and conflict, because he edits the world that he wants to present and those aspects aren't in it. He determinedly excludes who and what doesn't interest him, and tirelessly works to bring out the life and laughter and beauty that he admires.

ALEXANDRA SHULMAN

SEEING STARS

THE PORTRAITS OF MARIO TESTINO

Some seek in star beauty a refuge or a hiding place. For them the virtual reality of a beautiful face in a magazine becomes a virtual necessity. They see stars as a luxurious, otherworldly relief from the mundane. Inhabiting a parallel universe free of the snags and sags that dog ordinary lives, they are a license to dream. Others avert their eyes, considering the contemplation of stars to be beneath them. Yet others find the very existence of stars objectionable, deeming them responsible for casting their own supposedly un-astral endowments into unflattering relief against a world obsessed by the beautiful, the thin, the toned and the talented. For them the universe of Mario Testino holds few charms.

Shooting stars are Mario Testino's raw material and 'shooting' stars is what he does. To be the subject of a Testino photograph is either already to be a star or suddenly to become one. He can create the photographic Madame X of our moment. Just as a society beauty portrayed by the brush of a Sargent or the lens of Nadar could scandalise and ravish a nineteenth-century salon, so the re-inventing of Madonna or Diana or Kate in a new set of Testino pictures sends a quiver through the bosom of the fashionable world. To underestimate the possibilities of reconstruction afforded by the team of professional make-up artists, hairdressers and fashion stylists, the skills of the retoucher and the alchemy of lighting, is to be ignorant of a transforming power as technically and aesthetically exacting as anything that is achieved in a painter's studio. A generation of models can testify to the fact that a Testino cover is a passport (or at least a six month visa) to the height of fashion. He finds star quality in the most unlikely faces and places and his skill at creating stars has made him into one himself. Determined that his work is not art but commerce, he has perhaps made an art *of* commerce in the creation of his trademark – a particular nonchalant sensual beauty. This marque has made his photography

an engine driving some of the most successful fashion campaigns of the recent past and present which rely on bewitching portraiture.

Many of Testino's contemporaries see themselves as photographers who also take fashion pictures, but Testino is a fashion photographer no matter what he is photographing. What Testino turns his lens upon is by definition fashion, be it a place, a thing, or a person. He lives and breathes fashion and moves through its waters like a swan. Since the beginning of the 1990s, when he finally moved from being a talented newcomer to one of the most influential of image-makers, we have been exposed daily to his way of seeing. Testino girls and boys have stared at us from magazines, gazed out of books and smouldered down from lofty billboards. Slowly, responding to the suggestions of his fashion stories, other photographers have fallen under his spell or reacted against it so that the most persistent visual lexicon of current fashion photography weaves around the Testino universe either aping it or rejecting it. It has, however, been inescapable. In the same way that the women of the Restoration court wanted to be painted to resemble Charles II's newest mistress with the latest languorous eyelids from Lely's palette, it is the Testino girl that has dominated recent fashionable ideals of beauty. From Burberry and Gucci to Versace his advertising images have defined the atmosphere of the designers who have hired him. They are portraits of the houses that they represent, as well as portraits of who to be, or how to be, in their particular fashion.

But out of fashion, through this highly developed sense of style, has grown a body of work, of portraits commissioned and sometimes privately pursued. They have become portraits of the moment – and again this moment – sharp reflections of the glass of fashion. In turn they may become portraits of the age as surely as another age's Van Dycks or Gainsboroughs, for better or worse.

Arriving in London in the 1970s he found himself in a context utterly different from Peru where he had spent his early life. His family was close. Three sisters, three brothers. Nothing flashy, the Testino family lived in the Catholic respectability of a tree-lined street in Lima. Life was comfortable. All the more remarkable perhaps that Testino left this behind to travel to London to start at the bottom, an outsider with no money, only a determined belief in his own abilities. South America may have taught him to appreciate the good things of life, and given him the core imagery of the endless summer holiday that continually underpins his oeuvre, but it is his confidence, as apparently relentless as the waves at Ipanema, that washed away doubt and made him quite sure that he would be a great photographer. Others it must be said would take a little longer to catch up with him.

'I belong to a time in which many women and even men are obsessed with looking like models. In my work portraiture has a wider function beyond simply making someone look beautiful. It is a matter of identity. The identity of a fashion company has become like the identity of a living person in the modern world, or at least as real as a person in a novel or a film. These images can seem as familiar as someone you know. These people also need to be invented.'

Testino could not invent the woman for all these different purposes without having created a clear sense of his own woman first.

'It was an art director who pointed this out to me in the 1980s when I was starting and things were not going so well. He said "You know what Helmut Newton's woman looks like, you know who Bruce Weber's boy and girl are. You on the other hand have lots of ideas but you don't know who your woman is." You recognise the photographer by recognising the woman; it is as simple as that. At the time I had just arrived in England and was swept away by the deep involvement of the past in the present that affects everything in Europe. This was totally un-South American where for young people the major reference is the beach. Of course Peru is full of history but we all looked to the future not the past'.

His early work was static, day lit and very much influenced by the mannerisms of Cecil Beaton: 'Only because I was inexperienced and my first friends and collaborators introduced me to Beaton's work – I was fascinated by his achievement. I had found a way of working in daylight close to the window. I discovered through trial and error that I could manipulate the light by tearing holes in paper stuck on the window-panes to model the face of the person I was photographing. I did not use flash because it was beyond me technically and far too expensive. When eventually I could afford to work with an assistant I found one who was excellent at lighting. I always knew what kind of light I wanted but not how to achieve it. Suddenly whole new possibilities opened up. Strangely though, I

have frequently returned recently to the light that I began with, very simple daylight'. This mastery of what the fashion world calls 'the look' is the mark of a fashion photographer coming of age. In Testino's case it took years to find. He became such a regular visitor to Vogue House hoping to impress upon anyone who was prepared to listen the urgent need for *Vogue* to avail itself of his services in the early eighties that fashion editors would hide behind the rails of clothes at his approach. I was the arts editor and frequently urged his case. 'Tell me when he's gone' hissed the fashion director as she dived behind a jangling wall of hangers. Success eventually came with the assistance of Carine Roitfeld, now editor of French *Vogue*. With her unmistakable eye for a sexual chic she released the 'beach' in Mario, and became the fashion stylist who worked with him in Paris, Milan, L.A., New York. The two rode an unstoppable wave of their own creation which culminated in the advertising campaigns for Gucci with Tom Ford. Their portraits of tribes of astonishing, decadent Gucci girls and boys became a quintessential portrait of desirability, now legendary, which re-invented the company's image.

It has been said that a portrait happens not inside the camera but on either side of it. Testino's portraits have always clearly relied on his special rapport with his sitters, and often he achieves a sense in which the camera is there simply to document the moment of encounter between photographer and subject, as if the legion of collaborators just out of shot was invisible. Testino's army of collaborators and assistants amounts to a modern renaissance court, a tribe of fellow spirits. 'It is a simple fact that I would not be able to work as I do without the input of a large number of talented people, I know this and make sure that they know I do'. This said, in the days when he was striving to become a photographer, he worked alone on a project of portraits and nudes that provided the basis for what was to come. 'I had no jobs but I knew that I had to continue to work. I suppose it was like going to art school if you are a painter learning the basics'. In the way that a student might start by drawing an apple on a plate, Testino worked with the human body in daylight, unlocking the secrets of how to enhance its beauty using a camera. 'I learned how to make someone look good out of curiosity because in the end nothing is as important to me as people and how beautiful the human body is. Everything I do has stemmed from there'. In his words reverberates a distant echo of the humanists of the Renaissance, whose experiments with optics and study of the body established a degree of realism in the portrayal of the human form not seen since the classical era. Testino's portraits, born of an aggressively commercial and modern world nevertheless can claim to be part of the tradition of depicted beauty at a time when art itself prefers not to look at the beautiful straight in the face.

PATRICK KINMONTH

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OUT OF FASHION

Testino's portraits grew out of his ability to decide what someone should look like, then somehow to turn them into that person in a photograph. One minute you are sitting there quietly being you, the next thing you know you are in danger of becoming an icon.

It is presumably a talent that could be used for good or evil, but luckily Testino's vision is optimistic to the point of revision. He sees the silver lining before the cloud and is happy to wield a red pencil to retouch the ravages of time. In this world in which surfaces are enthusiastically enjoyed for their attractiveness, it is no crime to heighten the drama, to put onto his subjects the best face he can muster. He applies everything he has learned in the fashion studio to his portraiture. No parted lip will be more succulent, no eyelid smokier, no glasses darker, than in a Testino portrait.

Fashion is itself a dance of veils and Testino prefers to reveal the layers of its shifting focus at their best. But he never cuts the thread, albeit silken, that connects his world to a convincing reality. Whoever his subject may be, Testino will convince us that this is not just how he wanted them to look but how they really did at the moment he pressed the shutter.

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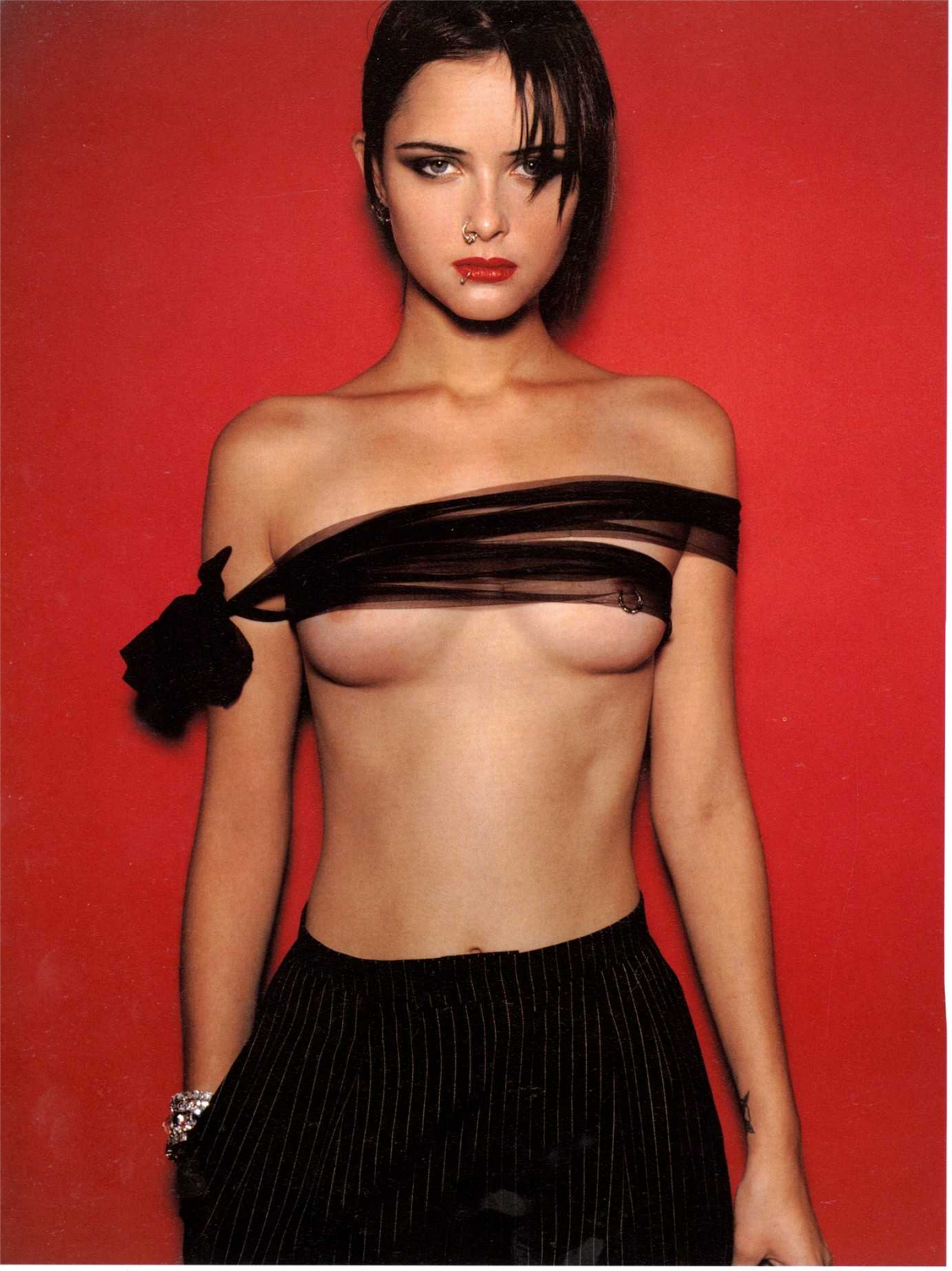

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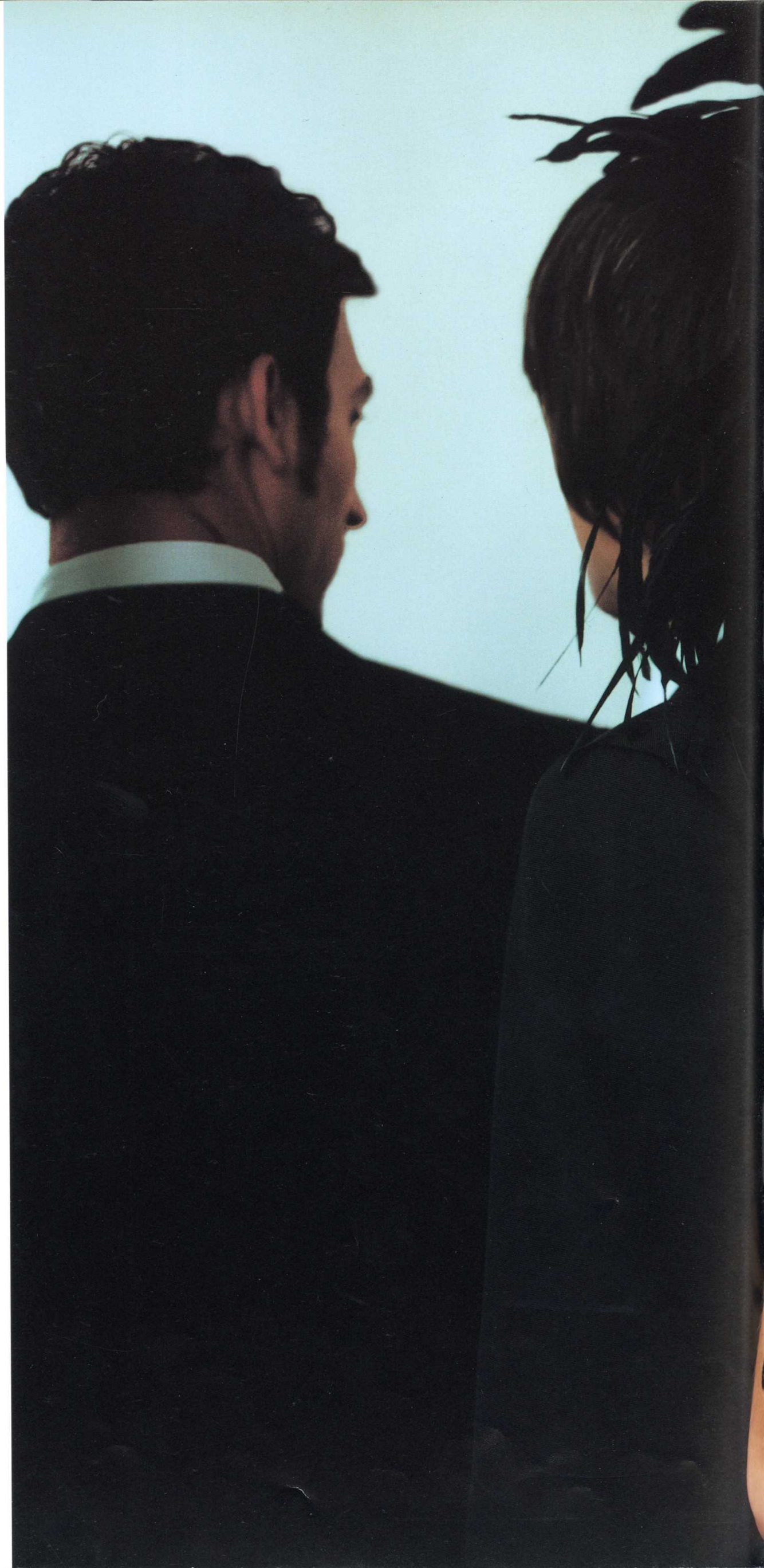

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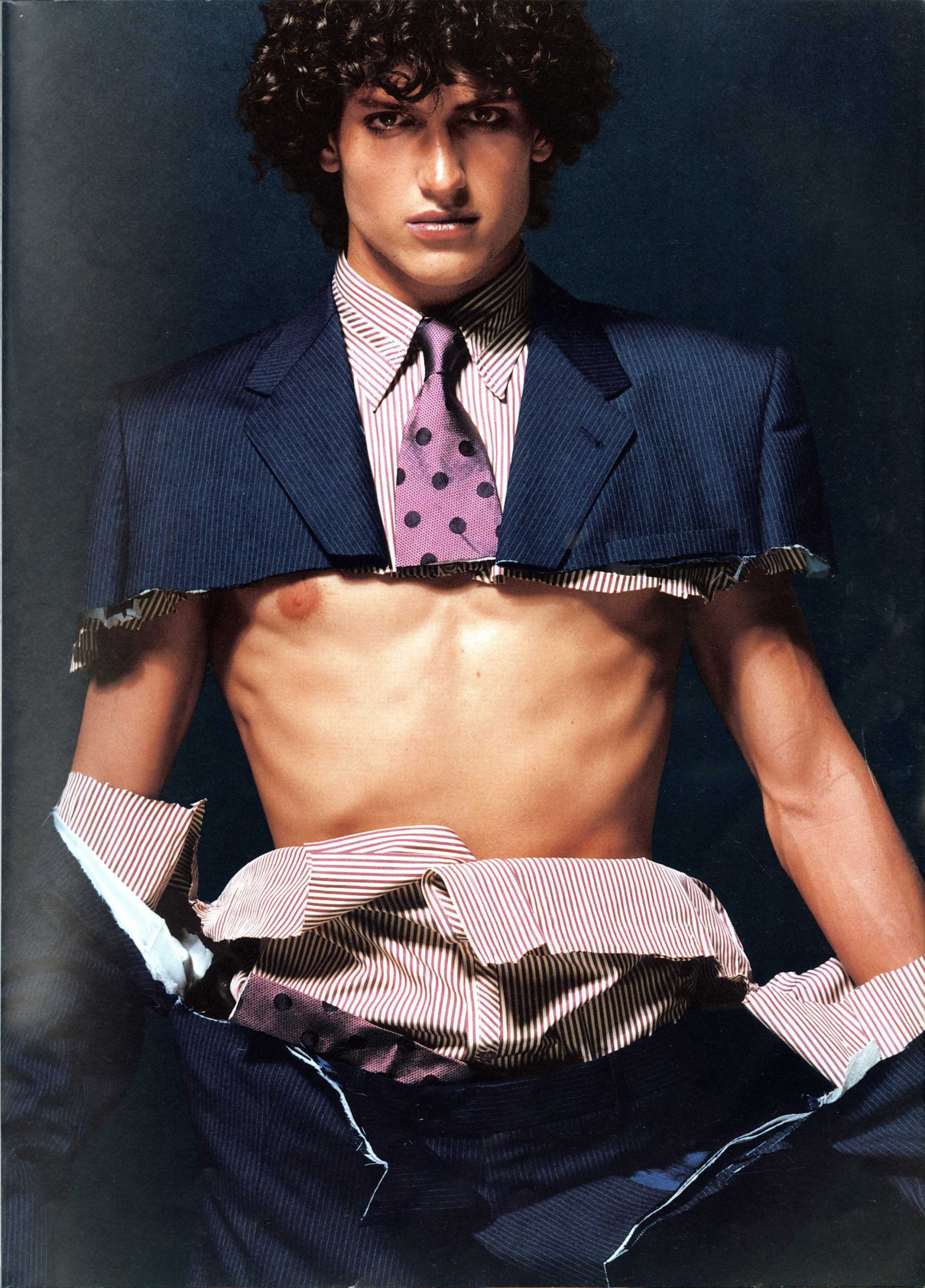

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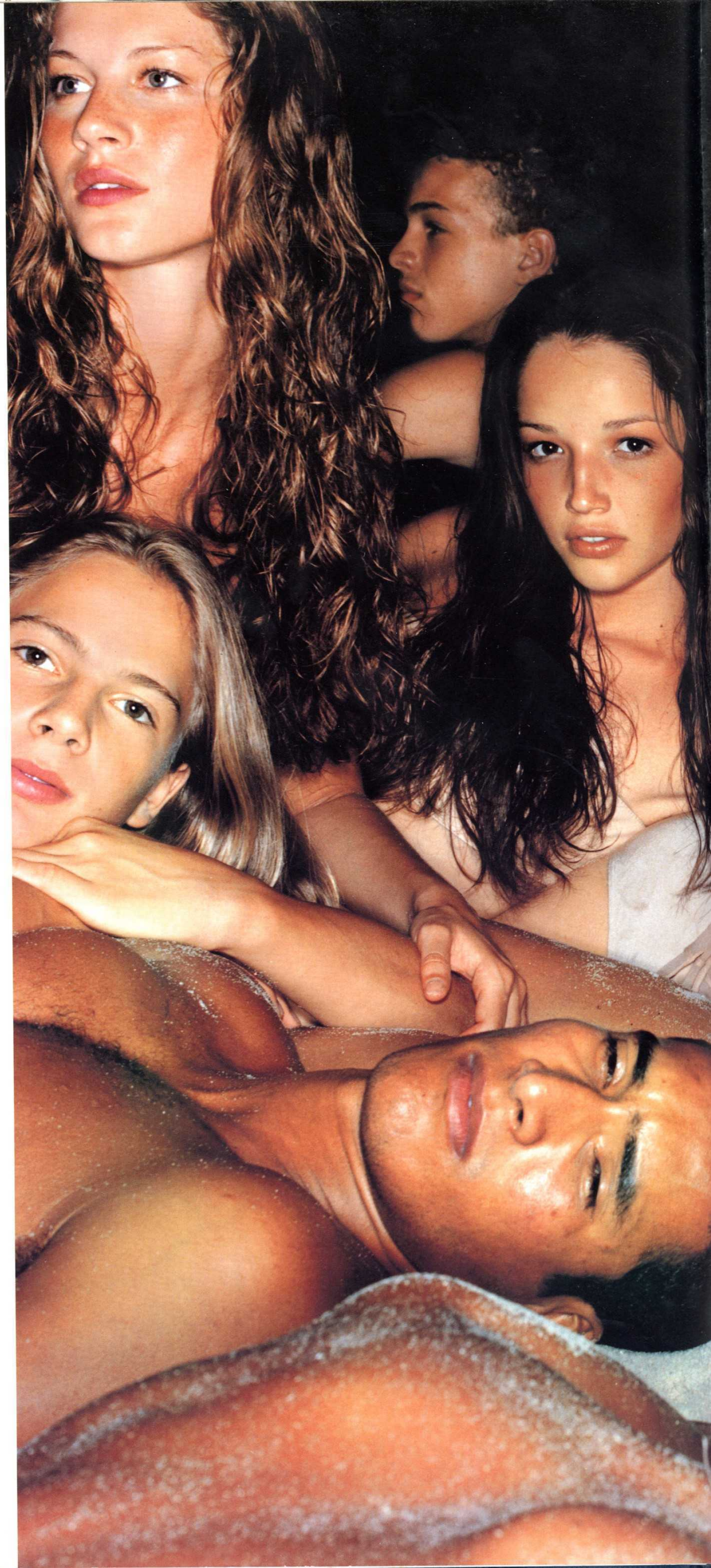

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KATE MOSS

Kate Moss, apart from being one of Testino's most frequent subjects, shares the decade of his success as a photographer. He first worked with her in Paris at the beginning of the nineties when she was seventeen, and he continues to do so more frequently than with any other model. There is between them a mutual trust and a creative collaboration which can be compared to the relationship between a choreographer and a dancer, or a painter and a muse, in that 'the energy is travelling in both directions', as Moss puts it. Testino describes the way in which the extremely individual quality of Moss's personality and looks means that every photograph of her is a portrait as well as a fashion picture. 'I work around her beauty and for different pictures concentrate on different aspects of her personality, but in the end they are all Kate, she has so much imagination and such innate taste that there is always something new to discover'.

Moss describes a day spent working with Testino as an adventure, 'I have grown up with him photographing me – we have grown up together in a sense. The trust between us means that we are free with each other, he does not trap me into a set way of being, we find the picture together'.

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CHANEL

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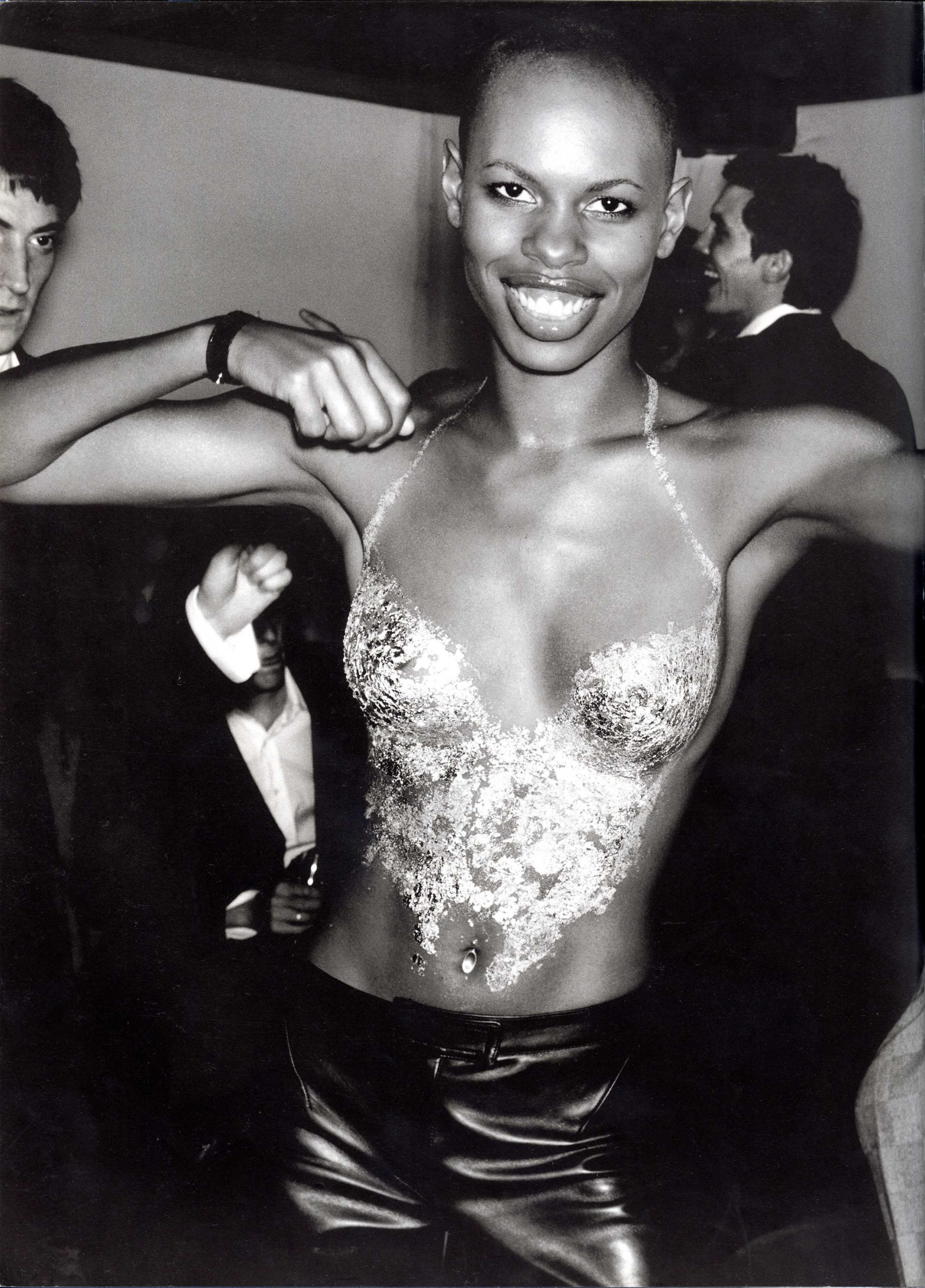
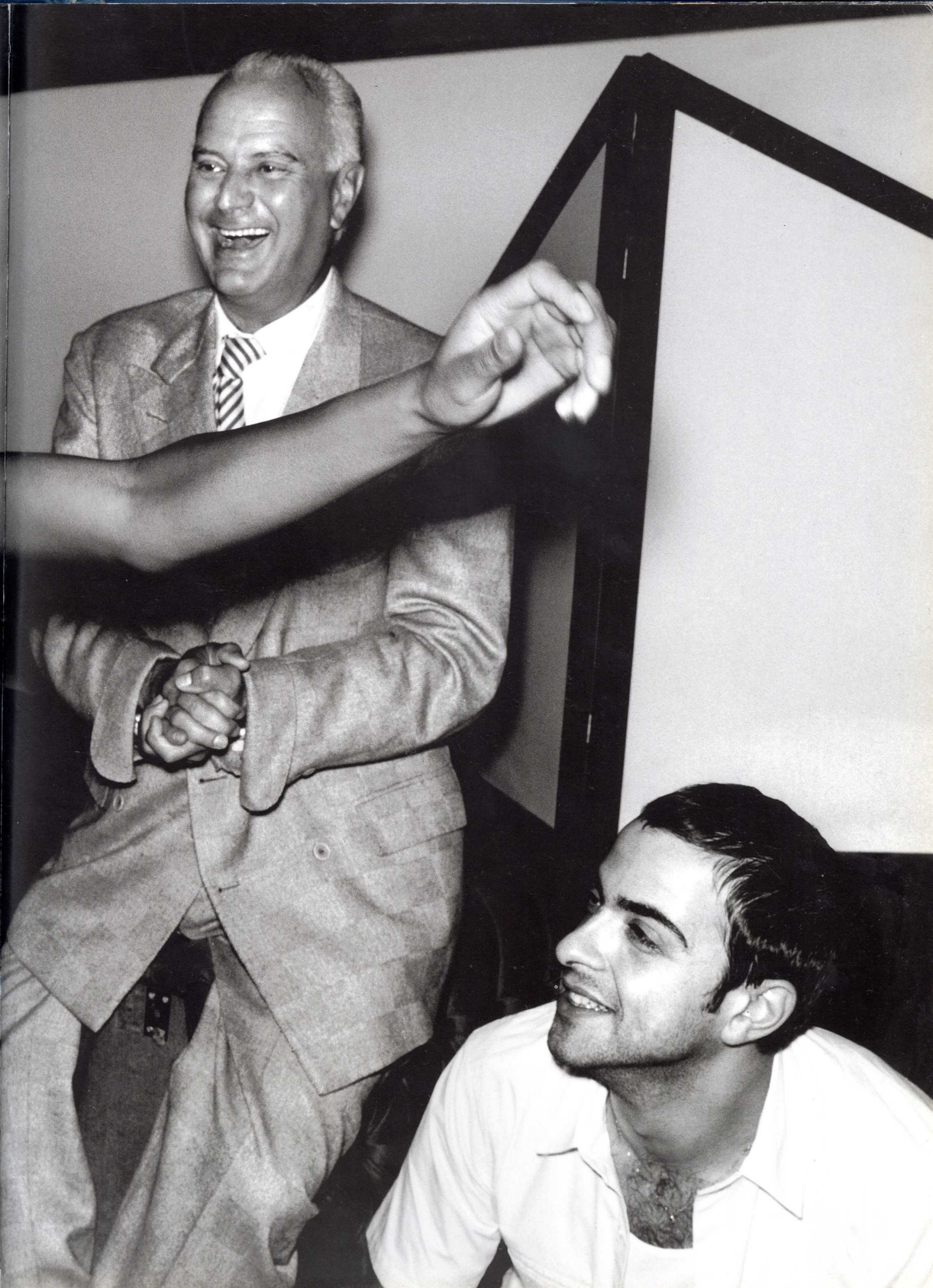
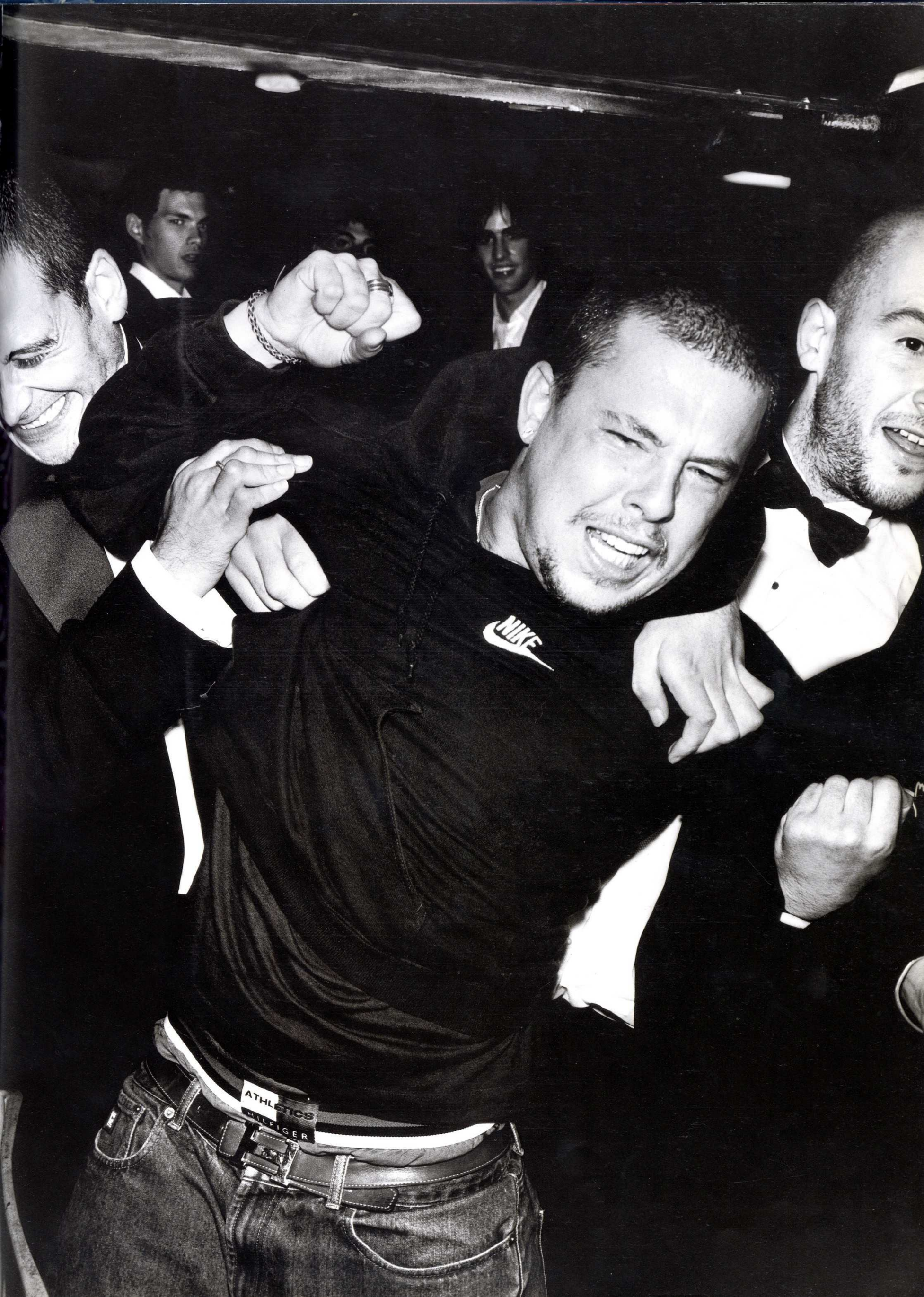
LONDON

The city in which Testino cut his teeth as a photographer is still his city of choice for 'inspiration, work and friendship'. In this as in many things he is a creature of habit. 'The life of a photographer is nomadic and uncertain, it helps to have some things, people and places you can be sure of and London has given me all of these'. Even if he prefers the beach in Rio – he is as often in Paris, New York and Los Angeles and travels to more cities in a month than an airline pilot – it is London that is his home. The portraits he has taken here culminated in an extraordinary sequence for British Vogue. These created the atmosphere of a party in celebration of London's return to feel-good status for the first time since the sixties. This energy arose from a new generation of artists and a flowering of unquestioned talent in the world of fashion. The bastions of New York and Paris looked to London for inspiration. It seems that Testino chose the right time to be here. 'When I first came to London in the 1970s it was a very different kind of place from today. In the last twenty-five years the British have become so much more emotional, at least in public. As a Latin person I can watch them like a thermometer and believe me, they are warming up. As a nation the British still blush though, a very endearing characteristic, which I hope they never lose'. His London portraits are marked by a lack of inhibition that seems to prove his point.



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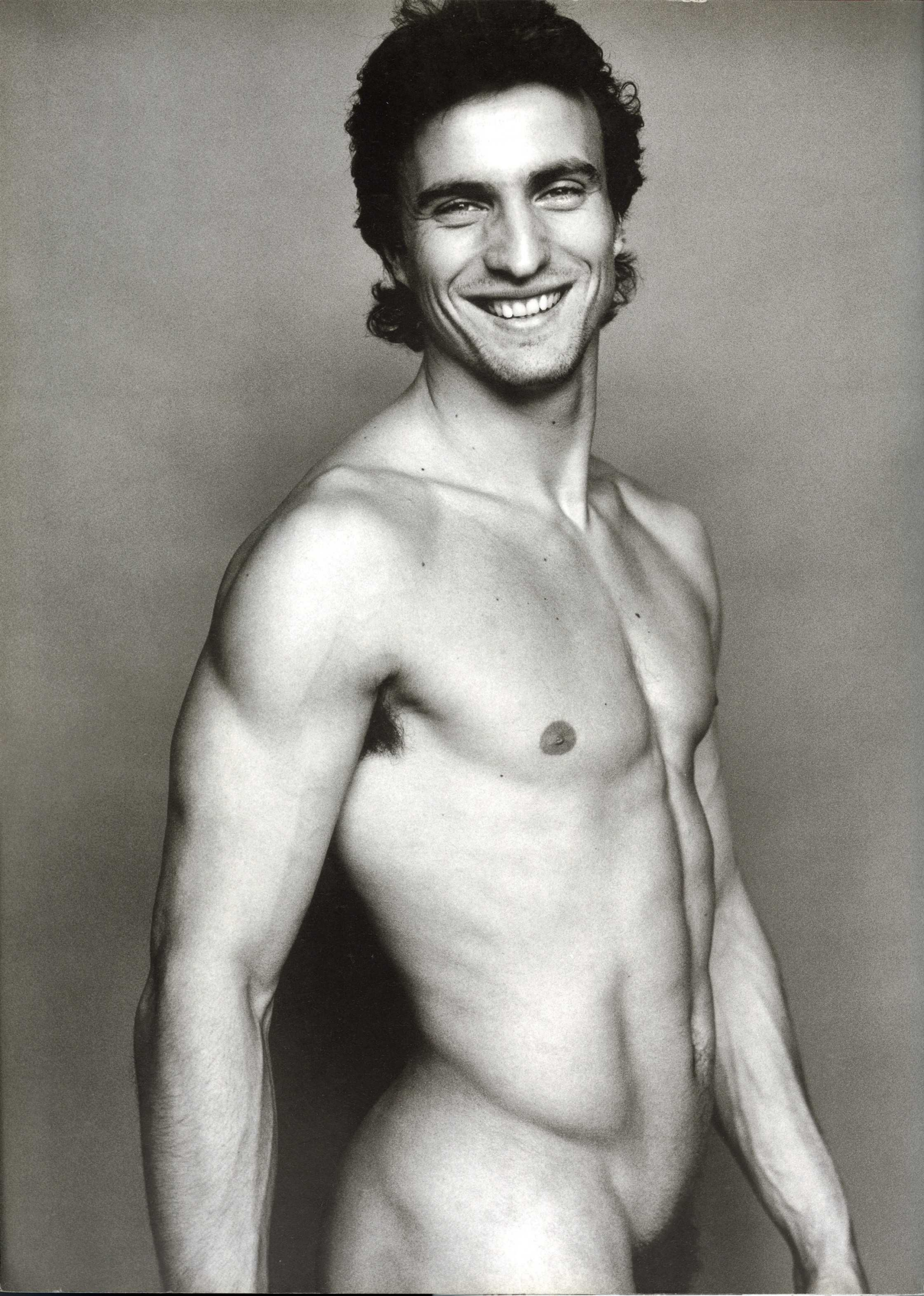

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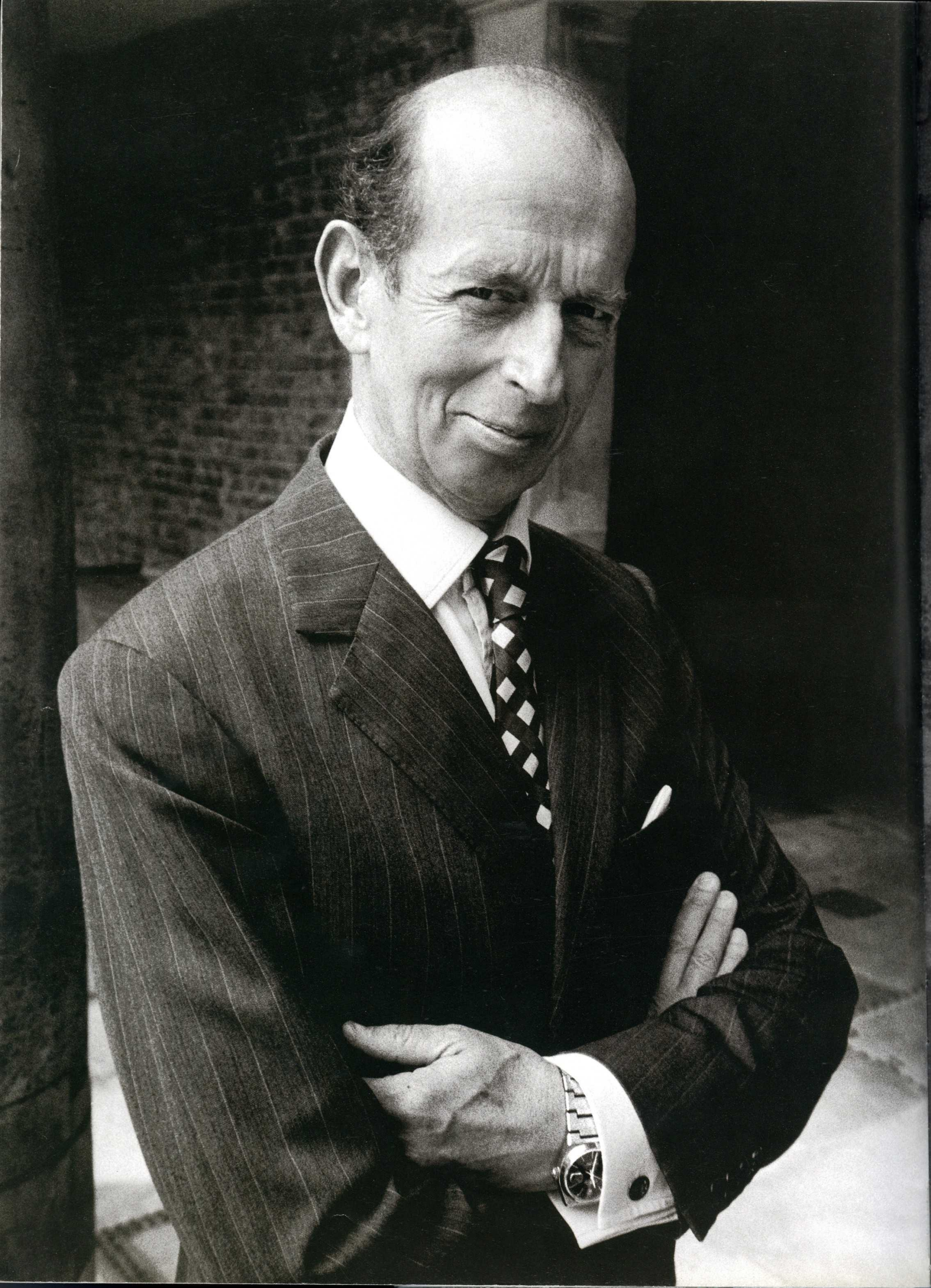
TRADITION

As an outsider Testino has an intriguing reaction to certain traditional aspects of British life. Perhaps one would expect someone who lives so determinedly in the present to have limited use for the past. But his work is marked by respect for institutions balanced by his questioning of their forms and his search for new ways of seeing them. 'I enjoy the idea of the rebel as much as the conformist, but I love the things that come from a civilised society, a society strong enough to allow freedom, and sure enough of itself to admit change'.

His portraits of royalty investigate the interface between the power of highly evolved traditional symbols and Testino's desire to reach beyond conventionally presented surfaces. Testino photographed Lord Frederick Windsor in a way that many people found surprising, astride a motorbike, Testino's modern echo of a knight on horseback. 'For me, working in the language of today he is shown as noble and glamorous, I do not believe I have taken any more liberties with his status than Van Dyck did with his forebears.'

As an observer of society Testino's role extends to every aspect of its portraiture. The photographer has a duty to document as much as possible, recording attitudes as much as appearances.

'I am struck by how royalty changes according to the country it belongs to and the particular individuals doing the job. Queen Rania of Jordan for example uses only the most modest trappings of royalty which enhances the sense of her serious intent for the future of her country.'



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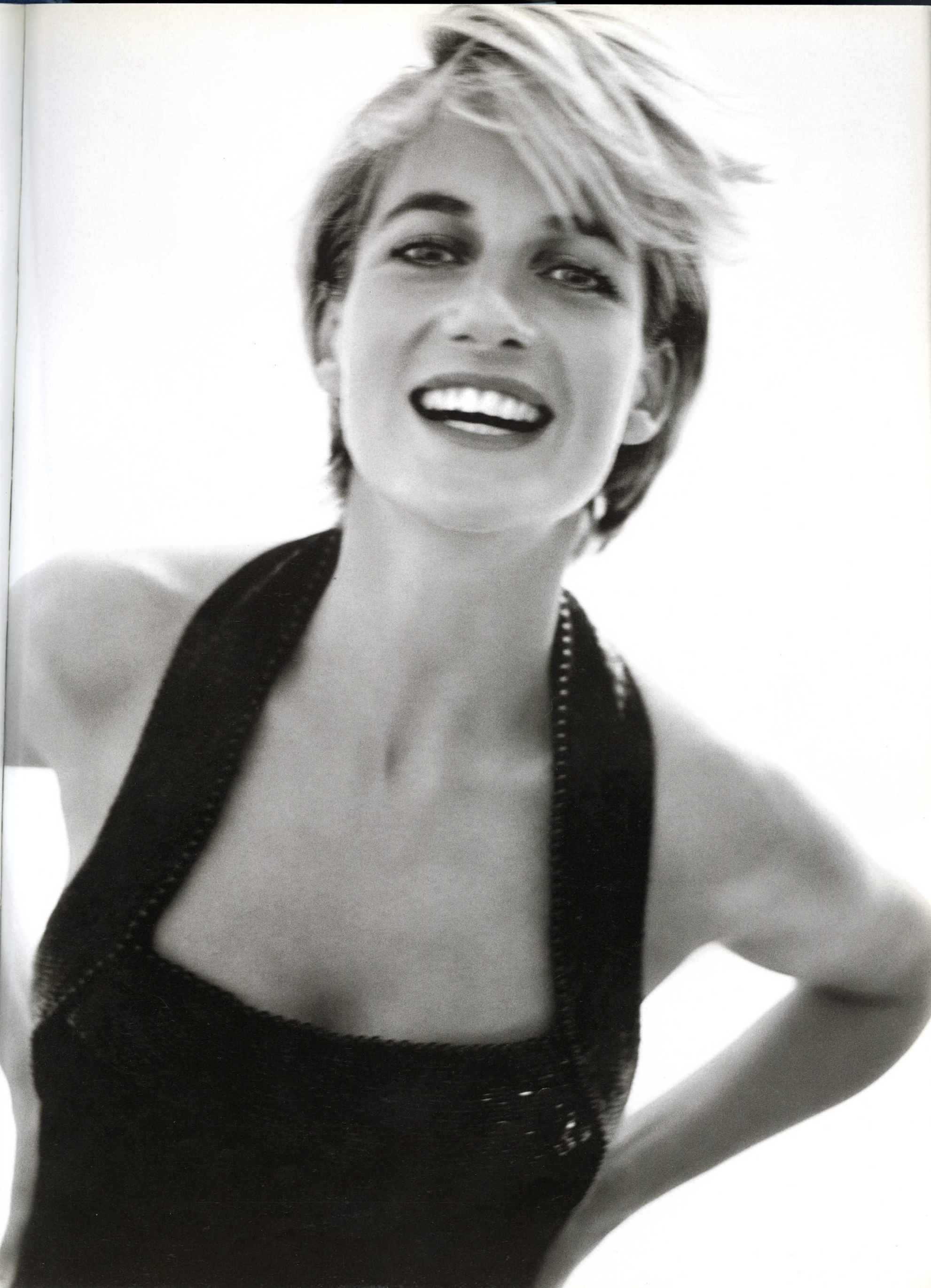
DIANA PRINCESS OF WALES

Taken on a single day in 1997, Testino's photographs showed a side of Diana that had not been seen in previous portraits: a relaxed and independent woman at the height of her beauty, apparently emerging with new confidence from a difficult period in her life. Testino, realising that for her photography was more often an ordeal and intrusion rather than a pleasure, made certain to create the most unthreatening atmosphere possible in the studio. She of course put him at his ease in the direct way for which she was famous. The result was a frank exchange.

'At first we were both nervous, stiff and I knew that this was a disaster for the photographs that I wanted to take. I put on music and started dancing and making a fool of myself. I know that you cannot ask of people something that you are not prepared to do yourself. I asked her to dance too. "Mario", she said, "I know what you want but I can't deliver... I am not Peruvian." It broke the tension, we started to laugh together and did not stop until the sitting was over. I was faced with a new challenge, not only did I have to find the way in which she looked best but at the same time I had to ask her to work with me in the same way as a professional actress would. I had to make it look as if I knew exactly where I was going with the pictures because I could not ask her to help me if the picture was going wrong, in the way that I would with a professional model'.

The contradiction is that the final impression of these pictures is of snapshots, as if nothing is calculated. 'The strangest things can alter the atmosphere. For example we took her shoes off and her jewels away, which immediately produced an informality, as if she was at home. That is how I wanted her to feel and look. My original reaction when *Vanity Fair* asked me to photograph her was the traditional image of the princess in the tiara then I realized that the most exciting image you could hope to see of Diana was as if you were alone in private with her. It is an incredible privilege to be allowed to be with the people I photograph, I try to translate the excitement that I feel, to get that extraordinary intimacy into the quality of the picture itself'.

Within months of the photographs being taken they had become unbearably poignant. They were to be her last official photographs.



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HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

When Testino works with actors and actresses who are willing to collaborate in the process of picture making, particularly happy encounters often result in repeated sittings. In those of Gwyneth Paltrow for example there is a sense of Testino inviting her to assume different roles in order to explore aspects of her qualities both as an actress and as a woman. Visual references in the setting, light and attitude evoke in turn the presidential elegance of a Jackie O, the feminine refinement of a Grace Kelly, the idiosyncratic charm of an Audrey Hepburn. These portraits hover on the threshold between performance and an investigation of Paltrow's own character, expressed through her skill as an actress. Testino himself plays a role, as director, and gives her license to play the lead in an idealised movie of her own life. This sense of a world in which beauty is almost naively unassailable is a general characteristic of Testino's work. He convinces the viewer that a Hollywood which is make believe and which only appears on film or in the imagination actually exists. 'In this I have been very influenced by Beaton who made use of obviously artificial props and settings in his work but which nevertheless make you believe that a world of fantasy is actually available: you could go there yourself, tonight, now, whenever you want'.

Whether treated as snapshots, hiding their careful art behind the visual language of the film-still, or revisiting with a modern eye the idealised portraits of Hollywood stars of the golden age, the photographs seem to prove that the world of glamour and beauty is not an illusion – even if an army of collaborators has brought this apparently effortless record of a fleeting moment to its fruition. As Testino explains,

'Actresses do not necessarily feel happy being themselves, for example Kim Basinger did not want to see herself in the polaroids taken as we were working, she said it would inhibit her. By losing our self-consciousness we find a freedom that is exhilarating. Self-consciousness is a kind of hiding, my photography is about revealing… it is a sort of contradiction but I have to make people feel that they are acting in order to reveal themselves more fully'.

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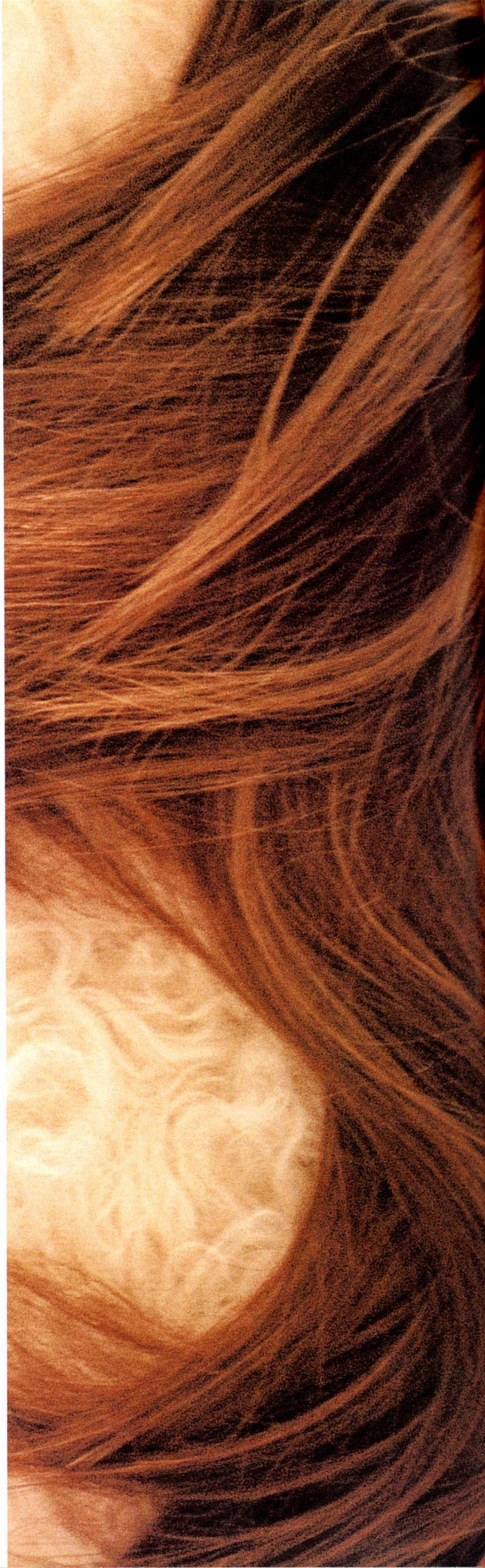

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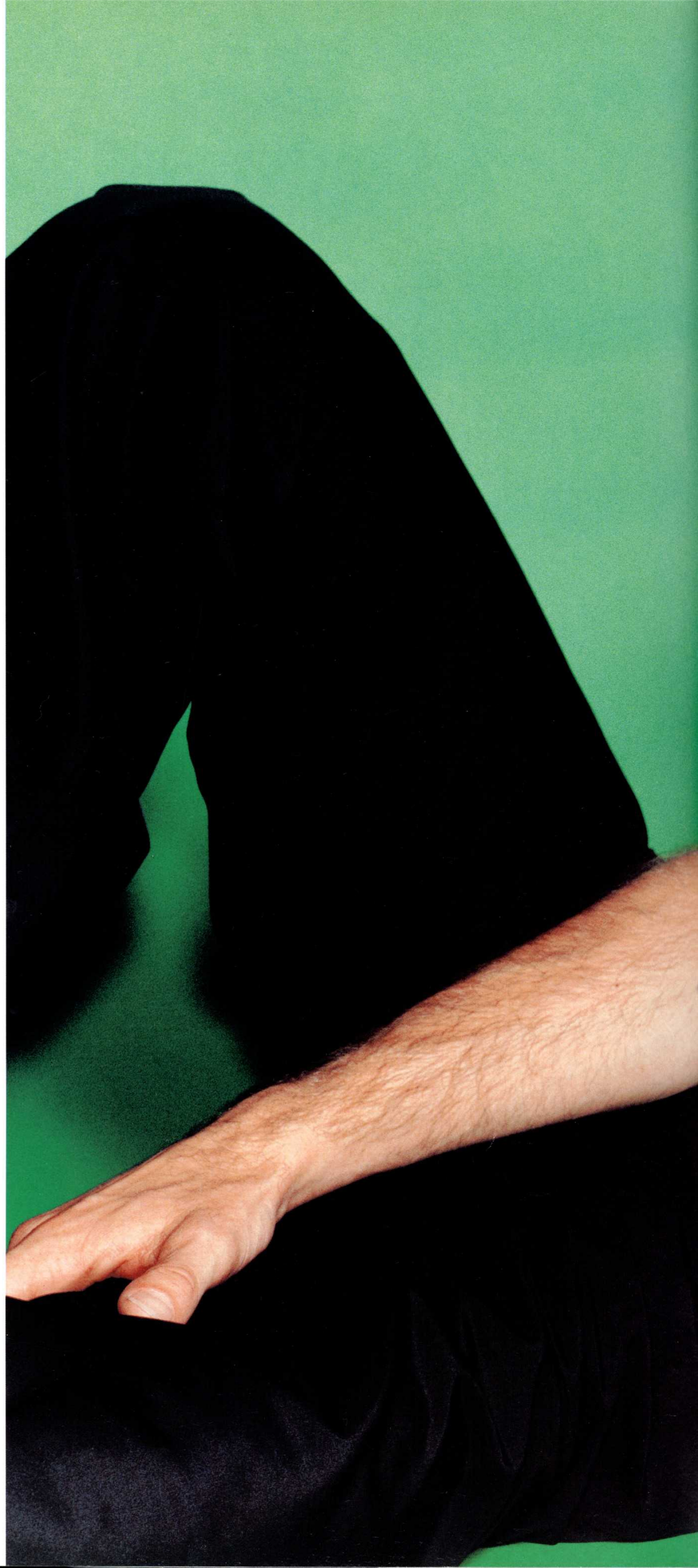

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MADONNA

In 1995 Gianni Versace asked Madonna to appear in a series of portraits wearing his winter couture collection. Madonna was the first major star to specify Testino as her photographer of choice and this was to be the first set of his fashion photographs to cross the frontier into portraiture of an established icon. Known as an artist who constantly re-invents herself the Madonna commission proved to be a new kind of challenge. 'I could not just walk in and tell her what I wanted to do. She had always controlled her own image. But I thought that if she had asked for me she wanted my way of seeing her. This gave me the confidence to convince her that she should appear very naturally. I had got to the point in my work where I could only really like a photograph of someone if I could feel that the image had an intense reality; that you actually sense the real life of the person. The first time I met Madonna I was struck by how beautiful she was in herself, not relying on the theatricality of her stage persona. It has been the longest collaboration that I have had with an artist of her standing. I was told that it would change my life to photograph Madonna. I did not realise to what extent'.
Versace headlined the pictures: Versace presents Madonna by Testino. Until that point Testino's work had only been recognised within the fashion world. The Madonna pictures changed that overnight.

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EPILOGUE

Some time ago, at a meeting to determine the future programme of exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery, we were faced by the judgment of Solomon. We had two alternative proposals. One was for an exhibition of the work of Horst P. Horst, whose work was classical, historical and already part of the canon of twentieth-century photography. The other was for an exhibition of work by Mario Testino.

Mario Testino is manifestly one of the best known and most internationally important, contemporary photographers. He has been responsible, more than anyone else, for a particular style of magazine photography — casual, vivid, sensual, and hyper-real. At the meeting, I remember handing round a copy of his book *Any Objections?* and registering the response on peoples' faces to his photographs, which are full of humour and a curiously innocent, sometimes androgynous, sexuality. I have always wanted the National Portrait Gallery to be able to represent the strongest currents in contemporary culture, as well as of the past. So, we decided to do an exhibition about Mario Testino as well as about Horst.

The process of organising the exhibition has been (most of the time!) exceptionally enjoyable, because Testino's photographs represent his approach to life. Every meeting has been a party. He has a capacity for making people feel that they are always on camera. This is why, in his photographs, sitters, who normally control their ego very tightly, let go, most obviously in his photographs of the late Princess of Wales which helped to establish his reputation.

But alongside the vivacity, the wilful casualness and the love of parties, there is a sense of another persona, of the South American boy who came to London in the mid-1970s and worked as a waiter in Peppermint Park half way up St Martin's Lane. In the early 1980s he lived in a flat in the old Charing Cross hospital just opposite the National Portrait Gallery, and he is known to have taken some time and a great deal of hard work and determination to establish himself as a photographer. It was only in the early 1990s that he became internationally

well known for his particular style of photography, more full-blooded than the then current mode of 'heroin chic'. As a result of his experiences in the 1980s, Testino is determined to make the best possible use of his current fame and to ensure that his work and the way he approaches it is not merely ephemeral. He documents the world of fashion as a participant. The images that result convey all aspects of the world of instant celebrity, of late night parties in London, New York and Rio de Janeiro. But they do so with a vivid eye for energetic composition and for the best possible way to bring out the personality of his subjects.

Part of the pleasure of organising the exhibition has been collaborating with Patrick Kinmonth who has worked with Testino throughout his career and who has been responsible for the design and selection of the exhibition, as well as contributing to this catalogue. He has provided an occasional note of sobriety to the enterprise, acknowledging the desirability of documenting Testino's career, as well as presenting its complexity.

We are also immensely grateful to Rose Marie Bravo of Burberry, who came on board with the support of Burberry at an early stage; to Nicholas Coleridge, Alex Shulman and Stephen Quinn, who pledged the support of *Vogue;* and to Dom Pérignon for supplying the appropriate drink with which to celebrate the exhibition, as well as sponsorship to go with it.

Many people in Mario Testino's studio have been involved, in particular Christopher Scott Vann, Huw Gwyther and Stephanie Rutherford. In addition, as always in the organisation of exhibitions, I would like to acknowledge the help and support of many people at the National Portrait Gallery, above all Kathleen Soriano, who has been responsible for its co-ordination.

CHARLES SAUMAREZ SMITH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mario Testino has an extraordinary eye, an infectious enthusiasm, a passion for perfection and an uncanny ability to put his subjects totally at ease. These traits give a signature quality to his work that make a Mario Testino photograph arresting, compelling and distinctly his alone. He accomplishes this with uncompromising commitment and an endearing charm.
When the National Portrait Gallery approached Burberry about our participation in sponsoring a Mario Testino exhibition, we didn't need to think for long about our response. Quite simply, we consider Mario a member of the Burberry family. Over the past nine seasons, Mario has been integral to the evolution of our advertising imagery. His unique talent and singular perspective are evidenced in a body of work that truly conveys the essence of the Burberry brand. We are honoured to co-sponsor the Mario Testino exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery as much as a salute to the quality of his work as to celebrate his legendary personal style.

ROSE MARIE BRAVO
Chief Executive, Burberry

We are very pleased to toast Mario Testino in his National Portrait Gallery exhibition and to be associated with his photographic genius. As perhaps the most famous prestige cuvée in the world, Dom Pérignon has had a long association with the world of artistic photography. Working closely with famous international photographers, we have sought to produce images which reflect the essence of Dom Pérignon – texture, balance, definition, purity and most importantly sensuality.
Mario Testino, with his vibrancy and unique ability to capture a sense of joie de vivre in his subjects is perhaps the ultimate portrait photographer of our time. His photographs possess the cool and highly polished style of an expert and his passion for fine art and portraiture shines through in every image.
Dom Pérignon, a wine with a great tradition, is open to contemporary talents, free spirits and creators who are in step with today. We wish Mario Testino every success for his exhibition.

RICHARD GEOFFROY
Chef de Cave, Dom Pérignon

When the National Portrait Gallery approached *Vogue* to sponsor the Mario Testino photographic exhibition we unhesitatingly said we would be delighted. Mario Testino has worked with British *Vogue* since 1982. He has produced wonderful images and great fashion photography, some of which feature in the exhibition. Mario is a delightful character, full of warmth and fun and this comes through strongly in his work for the magazine.
The Mario Testino exhibition will be a magnet for all lovers of fine photography. We very much want to support our leading fashion photographer in this, his most important exhibition to date.

STEPHEN QUINN
Publishing Director, *Vogue*

Mario Testino would like to acknowledge the support and
contribution of everyone who has helped in the making of this book:

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For my mother and father – Teresa and Mario Testino

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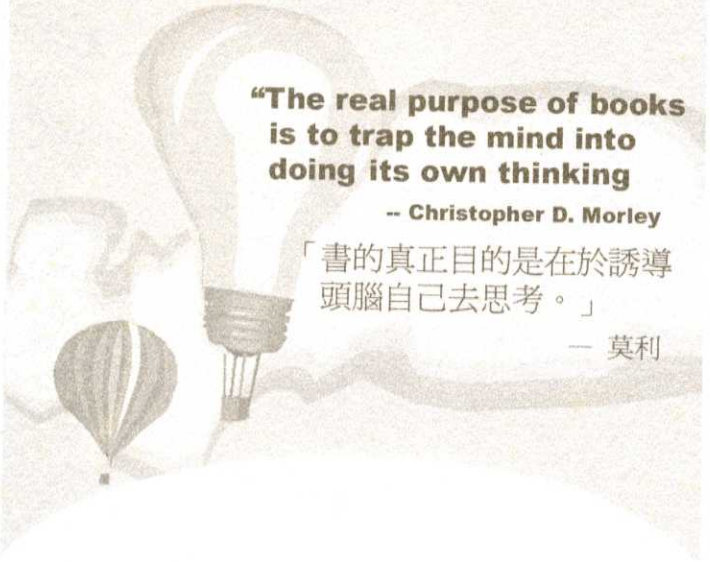

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